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ABSTRACT

After explaining why more choice among schools is a good idea, this paper provides details and evaluations of state plans for increasing choice in schools, delineates the characteristics of a desirable school choice plan, and advises parents on choosing schools. Current school choice policies in the following states are briefly summarized: Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Missouri, Minnesota, New York, North Carolina, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin. The evaluations of these policies conducted by Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Washington are then reviewed in detail. Options are then discussed for parents who are dissatisfied with the choices currently available to them in their local school district, and guidance is provided for gathering information about a school, visiting a school, and taking various steps before making a final decision about a school. The author concludes that with the proper research, advice, and guidance, families can make good decisions about schools for their children. (TE)

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HOW TO CHOOSE A SCHOOL FOR MY CHILD

by

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HOW TO CHOOSE A SCHOOL FOR MY CHILD

Sam Adams' mother talks proudly about what he's done in the last year. Three years ago Sam had dropped out of high school. After years of turmoil, his parents separated. His high school grades dropped during the period of family difficulty, and he fell behind. His high school of more than 2000 students seemed impersonal, and he finally just left. But then his state decided to permit high school students to enroll in community colleges, universities and vocational technical schools. Sam decided to attend a state university. He earned straight "A's" his first semester, and continued to make excellent grades. Sam says the Minnesota Post Secondary Options Program "turned my life around and helped me get going in the right direction."

Ann Tisdale, a parent in Buffalo, New York, says "I think the magnet school program as a whole in this city is the greatest thing that ever happened to us - seriously. The reason I say that is because we - and I have to speak here as a minority person-we were wondering whether other schools - tne non-minority schools were maybe getting more equipment or better teachers. And I have the feeling this might have been true...As a result of desegregation and the magnet schools, parents here feel we have more control over what's going to happen to our children...For people like myself who have choices and have made choices, we not only feel better about the system because we have choice but because we think the quality of education has improved greatly - even in the non-magnet schools, because everyone is trying to provide programs that will make schools attractive." (1)

Carmen Holmes says that if the Buffalo, New York, school district had gone ahead with proposals to achieve racial integration by telling parents where they had to send their children to school, she would have blown up

bridges leading from one section of the city to others. Instead, the government decided to integrate and increase student achievement by developing "controlled choice" magnet programs. Today about thirty percent of Buffalo's students attend these magnet schools And Mrs. Holmes is an aide at one of the magnet programs. She reports, "out of all this, what we've got here in Buffalo is something very unique. What we've gotten out of it is friendship and it goes city wide." (2)

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America is a strange and wonderful country. We believe in freedom and opportunity. Americans decide where to buy groceries, which house they will live in, what job they will take, where they will go to church (if they want to attend any church), etc. Selecting among different options is one of the fundamental freedoms Americans expect. But until the last few years, most families did not have the opportunity to select among schools for their children.

Recently, a number of states and school districts are developing programs which allow parents to select among various schools. Moreover, even districts which do not publicize options often will allow persistent parents to move their children from one school to another.

Selecting a school is a tough decision. We have magazines and books to help us select among cars, stoves, refrigerators, stereos, etc. But very little help is available about choosing schools. After explaining why more choice among schools is a good idea, this paper will help parents make some of the most important decisions they will ever face: which school(s) should their children attend?

WHAT ARE STATES AND SCHOOL DISTRICTS TRYING TO ACCOMPLISH BY EXPANDING CHOICE?

Increasing parental choice among schools has become more than a hot debate topic. During the last few years, a number of states found that providing choices among schools helped

* reduce dropouts,
* increase student achievement and enjoyment of learning
* improve parental involvement and satisfaction,
* encourage racial and economic integration,
* provide extra challenge for students dissatisfied with the conventional program,
* raise morale of educators who were allowed to create distinctive programs from which families select.

These results convinced the National Governors' Association to endorse more family choice among public schools in its 1986 report, Time for Results . (3)

Permitting selection among schools produced benefits for several reasons. First, parents were more involved and supportive of schools they had picked for their children. Second, educators were more effective when allowed to develop truly distinctive programs from which families choose. Third, students were able to attend programs which were designed to build on their learning styles and interests. Finally, educators must rethink their relationship with families, since there is no longer a "captive" audience.

Discussions about choice of schools at the state and federal levels have been quite different. The federal debate focused on the constitutionality and impact of providing tax funds to private and parochial schools. Most states proposed more choice among public and in a few cases, private non-sectarian programs.

DETAILS OF STATE PLANS

At least fifteen states have increased the range of schools from which families may select. (Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Iowa,

Louisiana, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Missouri, New York, North Carolina, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin) States have used choice for somewhat different purposes. No two state plans are identical.

State action varies within several categories: schools, students, scope and standards. Most states include only public schools in their choice programs, a few help support private non-sectarian programs. Most state plans involve only elementary and secondary schools; a few enable high school students to take courses at post-secondary institutions. No state choice initiatives deal with all K-12 students; they affect students of a certain age, or students with certain characteristics (such as dropouts or students dissatisfied with the programs offered in high schools). Plans vary in their scope. Some expand choice within a school district, others allow it across certain district lines. Finally, states established different standards. Some require all schools to use certain tests, teach specific courses and use particular books. Others delegate more responsibility. Some allow school boards to determine which options are available, others permit families to send children to "out of district" schools so long as certain conditions are met. A brief summary of state actions includes:

* Alaska: Permits students to attend high school in their town-village or at a state operated residential high school in Sitka

* Arizona: Permits high school juniors and seniors to take courses for high school credit at community colleges or vocational-technical schools

* California: Permits elementary students (K-6) to attend public schools in districts where their parents live or work, so long as movement does not have a negative impact on desegregation; provides funds to help school districts establish alternative programs and to private non-sectarian "educational clinics" which work directly with teenagers who have not succeeded.

* Colorado: Allows students who have not succeeded in their public high

school to attend another district's program if the two participating Boards of Education agree

* Florida: Permits high school students to take community college courses. Tax funds pay instructors' salaries. During the 1985-86 academic year, about 6,600 Florida high school students participated, (a little less than 2% of those eligible) earning a higher grade point average than other students in the same courses. 3300 of the courses were taught at community colleges, 423 were taught in the high school (4)

* Iowa: Permits families to appeal to the state Board of Education if they believe that their children are not receiving an appropriate education; if the State Board agrees it may order the local board to make additional arrangements including paying tuition at a neighboring district. In the first test of this law, the State Board ordered a district to pay tuition to an adjacent district for several students

* Louisiana: Supports a public, residential school for Math, Science and the Arts, a highly competitive school for about 500 students from around the state

* Massachusetts: Gives money to help school districts survey parents, develop and support different kinds of schools within a district in order to increase student achievement, empower educators and more effectively integrate schools; has also provided funds enabling minority students living in cities to attend suburban school districts

* Missouri: Helps pay for development of and transportation to magnet schools in order to increase integration between St. Louis and its suburbs

* Minnesota: Permits public high school juniors and seniors to take non-sectarian courses in public and private colleges and universities, and public vocational-technical schools. Tax funds follow students, who may earn high school or post-secondary credits. Also permits students ages 12-21 who have not succeeded in one public school to tranfer to a public school in

another district, so long as the receiving district has room and the movement does not harm desegregation efforts.

* New York: Helped fund development of magnet programs in a number of cities which help increase integration

* North Carolina: Supports a School of Science and Mathematics, a public residential high school for about 400 of the state's most talented 11th and 12th graders

* Virginia: Supports several regional magnet public schools designed to experiment with new ideas and offer challenge to gifted and other students dissatisfied with programs in their district

* Washington: Provides direct financial support to eight educational Clinics, private non-sectarian programs which work directly with teenagers who have not succeeded in public schools

* Wisconsin: Helped support development of magnet programs in Milwaukee and "double funds" education for students whose movement between Milwaukee and its suburbs increases integration

RESULTS OF STATE ACTIONS

Several states have evaluated the impact of their efforts to empower educators and parents. Massachusetts, Minnesota and Washington conducted three of the most comprehensive evaluations.

Massachusetts

Massachusetts spent about $7 million during each of the last five years to help school districts develop distinctive schools from which families may choose. The state's Bureau of Equal Educational Opportunity has studied the impact of these programs. The Bureau's director, Dr. Charles Glenn, concludes

> It has become clear that choice can do much to promote equity. It does so by creating conditions which encourage schools to become more effective, it does so by allowing schools to specialize and thus to meet the needs of some students very well rather than all students at a level of minimum adequacy, and it does so by increasing the influence of parents over the education of their children in a way which is

largely conflict free. (5)

One of the most comprehensive programs was developed in Cambridge, where all neighborhood K-8 schools were eliminated. Instead, the district created a "controlled choice" program in which all families select among schools which parents and educators helped develop. Massachusetts Bureau of Equal Educational Opportunity official Michael Alves reports that overall student achievement improved during the last several years, and that "the achievement gap between whites and minorities in Cambridge has been closing each year that the policy has been in effect." Alves believes that allowing parents to choose their children's schools has been a major factor in district test-score improvements.

"The biggest impact is on school climate...the policy appears to be stimulating positive educational environments, and it clearly reinforces the theory that socio-economic mixing enhances school achievement." Alves also notes that "schools that need improvement can be identified under the plan, because the choice process acts as a referendum in which parents judge the relative effectiveness of each school. The district administration sent a new principal and substantially revised the curriculum of one school, which received the fewest parental requests for admission. After several years, the school ranked first among the city's 13 elementary schools on the citywide test of basic skills, and began to attract a number of parents." (6)

Minnesota

In June, 1985, the Minnesota Legislature passed the Postsecondary Enrollment Options Act, which permits public high school juniors and seniors to enroll part or full time in colleges, universities or vocational schools. Tax funds supporting students' education follow them (so that if, for example, a youngster spends half of her/his time at a college and half in high school, each institution receives approximately half of the money.) Post-secondary

institutions may not charge any additional funds for tuition, supplies or books. Money is available to provide transportation for students from low income families. Students may earn credit toward high school graduation from the post-secondary courses, and if they later enter the post-secondary institution where they earned the credits, those credits are counted toward graduation.

3,668 students participated in the program during its first year of operation. This represented 1.7% of juniors and 4.7 percent of seniors. A random survey of 1000 participants found that:

* about 6 percent of the students participating had dropped out of high school. Thus, the program brought back students who left high school without a diploma.

* 95 percent of the students participating were either "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the program. 1 percent of the participants were "dissatisfied"

* 90 percent of the participants said they learned more by participating in this program than if they had taken only high school courses.

* About 2/3 of the participants reported that their high school grades were mostly "B" (47.7 percent), "C" (14.3 percent) or "D" (1.8 percent). (36 percent said their grades were "A.") Thus, most of the participants were not the highest performing students in their high school.

* Five percent of participants were Black, Hispanic and Native American, almost exactly matching their percentage of the overall state wide public school junior-senior student body

* A majority of the students earned either "A" or "B" grades at the post-secondary institutions,

* 86 percent of the parents involved said their youngsters studied more for the post-secondary courses than for high school courses.

The program appears to benefit those who take all of their courses at

the high school, as well as those who enroll in a post secondary institution. A number of high schools responded to the new program by increasing the number of Advanced Placement courses available, while others developed new cooperative relationships with post-secondary institutions. (7)

CHARACTERISTICS OF A DESIRABLE CHOICE PLAN

Not all plans to expand choice have the same impact. Details will determine whether programs reduce dropout rates, increase <u>overall</u> student achievement, and provide more opportunities for most educators to use their skills, talents and creativity. Policymakers may also want to offer more challenge for students and encourage more positive contact between students of different racial and economic groups. A carefully designed public choice plan is one of the most efficient and effective ways to help achieve these goals. Policymakers wishing to accomplish goals mentioned above should insist that

* A list of skills and knowledge all students are expected to develop is created. All students must know certain things to function successfully in a democratic society. While such a list need not be overwhelming, educators must know what is expected of them.

* Transportation is provided, especially for children from low income families. If transportation is not available, opportunities for these youngsters will not truly expand.

* Student assignments and transfer policies are fair, widely understood, and legally sound. Desegregation must be a consideration, which means that unlimited choice generally will not be possible in metropolitan areas. Selection should not be on a "first come, first serve" basis, which favors the msot informed, aggressive families

* An effective system of parent information and counselling is established, as part of the registration process

* Families are allowed to send their children to adjacent districts

into schools which have room, so long as this movement does not harm desegregation efforts. School boards in districts where families reside should not have the power to veto this movement.

* In states with small, rural districts a financial cushion is available for such districts during the program's first several years. For a limited time, these districts would continue to receive partial state funding for the net loss of students, if any. This idea, first proposed by the Minnesota PTA, was endorsed by the nation's Governors who agreed it would help small districts decide how to respond to the new policy while protecting students who decided to remain in the district.

* States should move to equalize funding among districts, reducing reliance on local property taxes.

* Planning, inservice and program development funds should be available to teachers, allowing them to create and improve programs in response to state guidelines and parental priorities.

* Surveys of parent priorities and assessment of what the system is providing are used to help develop programs and monitor progress.

* There are provisions for continuing oversight and correction, so that choice does not produce unintended problems. (8)

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More and more districts are using these principles as they allow families to select among various schools. How do parents decide which schools are best for their children? Although it's not exactly the same thing, think about how families select which car to buy. Whether it's a new or used car, the best shoppers ask themselves several questions:

1. What do I want the car to do? Am I going to carry lots of cargo? How many people will I be carrying? Will I be going on long trips, or will I

be using the car mostly around town?

2. What are my personal preferences? Do I like a certain color? A certain style?

3. What is available?

4. What have I heard about various cars? Do I know people who have driven them? If so, what did they think about them? What do more formal evaluations say about the past record of this car?

5. Am I comfortable after driving the car for a while?

These are some of the same questions to ask in selecting a school.

WHAT IF IT APPEARS THERE ARE NO OPTIONS?

Unfortunately, many school districts do not give families much choice among schools. Some districts do not want movement between what they call "attendance districts." This is their term for the geographic area served by a particular school. Some administrators feel it's too much trouble to offer options, some believe parents don't know how to select among various programs. Some insist (despite considerable evidence to the contrary) that a particular school can be good for all students. What can a parent do in such a district?

There are a number of things to do. First, talk with other parents and community organization staff members. They may be able to tell you about exceptions, and who the district officials are with the power to grant them. Many districts will allow a student to transfer from one school to another if a parent insists and has a special reason. The following reasons have been used successfully by some parents:

* The school I want my child to attend is much closer to the place where day care is available before or after school.

* The school my child has been assigned to is much further from my home than another school.

* There is a special program my child needs or would benefit from at the school outside our attendance area.

* Moving my child to another school will improve the racial balance of the district.

* My child is ready for much more advanced work.

Even though it is rarely publicized, some school districts and states permit unusually talented high school students to take courses in colleges and universities. States like Michigan, Florida, Minnesota, New Mexico, California, Maine and Washington allow students to earn high school credit while taking college and university credits. It's worth checking with post-secondary institutions to find out whether this is an option in your area.

Sometimes it will be necessary to make a "fuss" before your request is approved. The expression suggesting that "the squeaky wheel gets the grease," is very true in education. School districts sometimes do not have firm rules about transfers. After talking with other parents, the local PTA president, and community groups, you should contact the district office - probably the district's superintendent. It's a good idea to start with a letter explaining where you want your child to go to school, and explaining why. Obtaining a letter from a doctor supporting your request always is helpful. Be sure to keep a copy of your letter.

If you haven't had a response within two weeks, call. Sometimes district administrators will try to settle the problem. In other cases, you may have to go to the school board. While this is worth a try, it's very rare for school boards to overrule superintendents.

This seems strange, because school board members are elected to represent the public. But state and national school board organizations strongly encourage their members to support the superintendent, or get a new one. They'll also sometimes use the "if we grant your request, we'll have to

deal with lots of others" argument. In fact, most parents don't request a change - so this generally is a false argument. But it is used.

In a few places, parents have the right to appeal a school board's decision to the state. In Iowa, for example, parents may ask the State Department of Education to intervene if they feel the local district does not provide an appropriate program for their child. Several parents who recently used this law were successful. The state ordered their district to pay tuition for their children to attend school in a neighboring district.

What happens if the district denies your request and the state can't overrule them? You have several options. The first is to look at independent schools: private and church-related. Tuitions vary greatly - not all independent schools are extremely expensive. A second possibility is to talk with officials in a neighboring district. Sometimes they will accept "outside the district" students. In these cases they generally charge tuition - like a private school.

A third option is to educate your child at home. Thousands of parents are doing this, and there are national and state organizations of "homeschoolers." Laws on this vary from state to state - it's worth checking because some states are very antagonistic, others supportive, and others neutral about the idea.

Sometimes parents decide to move so that their children may attend another school. Minnesota's Governor Rudy Perpich has often spoken of his disappointment in one school district which led him to move. When first elected to the state legislature, his family looked first for a nice house near the State Capitol. However, his children were bored in the schools and the district was unwilling to provide any options. After being re-elected, Perpich looked first at the quality of various schools, and then selected a house. This experience helped convinced him to support family choice among schools, because he recognized that many families are not able to move from

one district to another.

A final option is to work with other parents to convince legislators and school boards that families should have options. The Minnesota PTA has worked closely with other groups to convince its legislature that choice among public schools is a good idea. The legislature has responded, adopting programs described earlier in this paper. Parents in many districts have convinced their local boards to offer choices among various schools. And the public is becoming more and more supportive of the "choice" concept. A 1987 national poll found that 71% of parents wanted the opportunity to choose their children's schools.(9)

School board members and legislators need to hear from parents who want more choice. In many places, parent pressure has succeeded. As the National Committee on Citizens in Education reported,

> It has taken education and the professionals who run it many years to come to the realization that not all children learn with the same style, at the same pace, or in the same kind of classroom. To realize all these things is not necesarily to do anything about them. ...in some communities parents organized and applied so much pressure on schools that they turned out to be the leaders for change. In the last few years more questioning, more activity and more accomplishment have marked "alternative education programs" for children. There is still a long way to go. (10)

GATHERING INFORMATION ABOUT A SCHOOL

As explained above, most parents really do have options among schools. These choices may include public, private and church-related schools. How do parents decide which is best for their children?

Timing is important. Families should begin in December thinking about the school they want their children to attend the following fall. Many districts require student assignment decisions by February or March for the coming September. Administrators do this because they have to allocate money and staff to each school. The number of students in a school is a major

factor in determining how many teachers and resource money a school will have.

If a family moves into a district during the school year, they have the right to place their child in the local public school. However planning and talking with district officials ahead of time is generally helpful. Sometimes parents will want their children to finish the school year in their former district. Most districts will allow this - but it's worth discussing the various possibilities.

Families ought to begin by asking themselves what they want the school to do for their children. Most parents want their children to develop strong basic skills: reading, writing, spelling, mathematics. But some schools offer special programs - in arts, computing, languages, career-training etc.

Some schools, especially high schools, offer training in special job areas. Houston has a health careers high school. New York City has a high school for students intending to go into business. Seattle offers a program which provides training for students interested in horticulture and floral design. St. Louis has several "Junior ROTC" programs. Many districts have programs for students preparing to be carpenters, automechanics, etc. Families ought to decide what is most important to them. Beyond the "3'Rs, what else do parents want the school to help their children learn?

Schools, like automobiles, have different special features. Schools do other things besides help students learn skills. Some elementary schools, recognize that the easiest time to learn a language is when a person is young. So they offer language courses for elementary age students. A few schools even offer a "language immersion" program, in which much of the instruction is offered in a different language. In our increasingly international economy, knowing a second and third language can be extremely valuable. Parents in some communities have been delighted with their childrens' experiences in elementary schools offering different languages.

There are other special features which will interest some families. Certain parents want their children to begin studying music in school at an early age. Some schools offer extensive instructional music programs - others have virtually nothing in this area. Some parents are looking for a school which is open early in the morning and offers after-school activities. More and more schools are offering these programs (sometimes called "Latchkey.)" Some programs bring together students of different races.

Another issue is the distance of various schools from a family's home. Many families prefer that their children, especially young children, attend school close to home. Other families think this is not as important, so long as the school at the end of the bus ride offers outstanding programs.

Before selecting a school, parents ought to think about their child's personality. What is the youngster like? In the last few years we've learned that people have different kinds of "Learning styles." Some students need a great deal of supervision, others do better with more freedom. Youngsters who can handle responsibility might flourish in an "open school." Though the term is used to describe a variety of programs, it generally means a program in which youngsters are allowed to move at their own pace. This means that they can move ahead quickly, without waiting for all of their classmates to understand the material being discussed. Many open schools try to begin with students' interests, and develop writing and reading skills as part of assignments based on those interests. For example, students of different ages who are intrigued by animals might read, write and study about animals. Meanwhile, youngsters fascinated by outer space might have similar activities - but with reading and writing focusing on those themes.

Some schools provide extensive opportunity for youngsters to learn out in the community. Most secondary schools arrange part-time jobs at fast-food franchises for some of their students. But some schools go beyond this. They arrange internships with doctors, lawyers, journalists, legislators,

businesspeople, etc. These internships help students under the world of work, and get a better sense of what a particular occupation is really like. Participating in these "outside activities" is extremely beneficial for certain students.

Other students would do better in a fundamental or traditional school. Generally these programs provide little choice for students - the classes are directed by teachers who decide what all students will study.

Another key issue in selecting a school is its size. Some youngsters might "fall between the cracks" in a large school - they need the intimate atmosphere of a small school. Other students can gain from attending a much larger school with many different kinds of courses. Some students do very well in one kind of school, and very poorly in another.

This seems strange. Won't an outstanding student do well in any school? The answer is "Not necessarily." In 1985 Minnesota decided to allow high school students to attend courses at colleges and vocational technical schools. Hundreds of students who had dropped out of high school returned so that they could enroll. Hundreds of students who had "B" and even "C" averages in high school took a few courses in college. Most of these students did extremely well in college - earning a higher grade point average than the first year students at several colleges. Some students who were doing very well in high school also took college courses. Generally they did well. But the success of dropouts and average students showed that many of them were ready for the greater freedom and increased responsibility of college.

Because students learn in different ways, some districts have established programs with similar goals but different techniques. Minneapolis, for example, allows parents of elementary age students 5 basic options. Families may select from among elementary schools that use a Montessori, Continuous progress, traditional, fundamental or open school philosophy. Each of these schools tries to help students develop strong basic

skills, learn to be creative and solve problems. However, some feature much more direction from the teacher, others give students more freedom. Some group students together on the basis of age, others allow students to make progress as quickly as they can in each area. In a continuous progress program, for example, an 8 year old might be working part of the day learning with 9 and 10 year olds in math, and part of the day with younger students in reading.

Some secondary schools provide much more in the way of extra-curricular activities than others. It's important to ask several questions about activities like debate, journalism, speech, drama and athletics. First, what extracurricular activities are available? Second, what percentage of students participate? In smaller schools, a higher percentage of students are active. Larger schools may offer more extra-curricular activities. But in many large schools, it's more difficult to reach leadership positions in these organizations. Parents and students should not just assume that there were be opportunities in a larger school.

After thinking a bit about what's really important, a parent should find out what's available. Most districts and states which offer choices provide descriptive information. Sometimes schools have brochures describing their philosophy and program. Just like automobiles, these descriptive materials rarely offer emough information to make a final decision. However, they can be useful. (11)

Families should look at descriptive brochures carefully. Parents need the answers to several key questions.

1. May I visit some of the schools? If so, how is this arranged?

2. What is the admission process? Is it "first come, first served?" Is there a lottery?

3. Are there application deadlines? Usually districts ask parents to apply sometime in the spring so the district can plan how many students will

be attending each school in the fall. Parents who wait to register until the summer or fall may be disappointed when the school they prefer already is full.

4. Is anyone available to help me decide which is the best school for my child? Districts with the most experience offering choice also help families select among different programs. Cambridge, Massachusetts has a "Parent Center" where parents help other parents learn more about the different schools. (12) East Harlem's District Four has no neighborhood junior high schools. All students and their parent(s) decide which school to attend. Each student, as part of her/his studies during the sixth grade, learns about different programs and how to decide among them. Seattle, like many large districts, has a telephone number which parents can call for information about student placement. The state of Minnesota published a brocnure describing its Post Secondary Options Program. For the first several months of the program, the Minnesota Department of Education provided a "toll-free" phone number which parents could call to get information. Washington state publishes a catalog listing each district's alternative programs. Parents may want to start by calling the public information office of their local school district.

Sometimes parents get information about various school districts from real estate agents. While helpful, families should be cautious about this advice. There have been instances when real estate agents gave out inaccurate information (i.e. telling parents that a house was in one district, when it turned out to be in another district, or asserting that no family which could afford to live in a suburban area would send its children to city schools.) Real estate agents generally are most interested in selling homes, not in the best interests of children. While real estate agents can be helpful, wise families will gather information from various sources.

VISITING A SCHOOL

Most people would not buy a car without "test-driving it." They're absolutely right. A car may seem terrific on paper and the show-room floor. But it may not seem "just right" after driving it for a few minutes.

Selecting a school is something like this. Written information can be very useful, but a parent and child should always visit a school before enrolling in it. Schools have very different "feels." Some are warm and welcoming. Others are hostile.

As they walk around the school, parents should ask questions like the following: Do I feel comfortable walking into the school? Do the people who work here seem to care about whether my child comes here? How do the adults talk to children? Are they friendly or harsh? Do the adults seem afraid of the children? Do they make negative comments about some of the students? How do staff members feel about each other? Is there mutual respect? Do teachers make negative comments about administrators? Are there some areas of the school or some classrooms the tour-guide avoids? Does the school display examples of excellent student work? Is the building well-maintained?

In general, schools where students do best are clean, orderly, pleasant places. Staff members in good schools respect eachother, their students and their parents. They speak enthusiastically of the children and learning. Teachers display outstanding student work and seem happy. Children are friendly and respectful to the principal. Parents should hesitate before placing children in schools which don't have these characteristics.

Ask for examples of ways parents are involved in the school. Is it primarily (or exclusively) fundraising? If so, this is not a good sign. There is considerable (and growing) research that the more parents are involved in their children's education, the better those children will do in school. (13) A recently published summary of research found even schools

serving low income communities could find ways to involve a student's parent(s) or guardian - and this involvement had a real, positive impact on achievement. A major research study has just been completed on public, church related and private non-sectarian schools. The authors conclude that students achieve more in many church-related schools than other kinds of schools because parents are so involved - because there is strong and continuing communication between educators and parents. (14) These studies conclude that regardless of affiliation, public, independent or church related, in the most effective schools:

* educators give parents specific activities they can use to help increase their children's learning
* educators encourage parents to visit their child's classroom
* parents help educators set up special activities and programs
* parents have opportunities to serve on advisory committees

FINAL STEPS

Before making a final decision, the best shopper checks a product's reputation. There are magazines which rank the performance of cars, stoves and refrigerators. They often tell how reliable the product is; how long it lasts.

Unfortunately there is not such clear information about schools. Most places can show students test scores. But this isn't enough information. Parents ought to find out whether test scores are improving. When looking at test scores, find out:

* What kinds of students are being compared. Are students in the school being compared with all other students of their age throughout the United States? With students their age in large cities?
* Whether the tests show actual skills students have. Some tests are

"norm-referenced," others "criterion referenced." "Norm referenced" tell you how students compare to other students." "Criterion referenced" tell you what percentage of students in the school can answer a particular problem successfully - such as a math problem. Most national standardized tests are "norm referenced." But it isn't enough to know that students in a particular school score "above average." Compared to a number of other countries, many US students do not do particularly well on many tests of academic knowledge.

The principal should be willing to share information about test scores. If a administrator refuses to give you information about test results, think very carefully about placing your child in that school.

Some districts and states publish school by school comparison of test scores. Generally, although not always, the highest scores are made by students from wealthy families. But there are some excellent schools serving children from low income families which have outstanding test scores.

Test scores are not the only measure of a school's success. Some schools have conducted surveys of their graduates. Parents should ask about this. Many parents will want to know what happens to a school's graduates. An important statistic is the percentage of students who go on to some form of post-secondary education. Generally, high schools in more affluent areas have higher percentages of students attending colleges and universities. But this is not always the case. Some urban schools pride themselves on encouraging and assisting students to continue their formal education.

Another important measure is attendance. Parents should ask about attendance, both of students and the teachers. A school with a more than 10% absence rate of either teachers or students may have some serious problems.

A less precise, but vital measure is neighborhood reputation. How do ministers, social workers, businesspeople and other respected people feel about the school? Do the teachers have high expectations of <u>all</u> students? Does the school have a reputation as a place where children learn, where

educators work closely with parents?

MUST STUDENTS STAY IN A SCHOOL ONCE THEIR FAMILIES CHOOSE IT?

Families which select their children's school generally are more involved and committed than families whose children are assigned to a school. However, no selection process is perfect. Families sometimes spend months researching a car before purchasing it, only to find after a few months or years that it just isn't what they wanted/expected. The same holds true for schools. Young people grow and develop.

A school which seemed appropriate at one point may be less appropriate later on. Most high school students in Minnesota have decided to take most of their 11th grade courses in the high school, though they are able to take college courses. A larger number of 12th graders (seniors) are taking college courses. While not necessarily critical of their high school, they are ready for a different challenge.

Families should not feel that they must keep their children in a school for years after they have selected it. It is wise to give the school a real chance, and to work closely with administrators and teachers. It probably is not in most students best interest to change schools every year. Youngsters can gain from getting to know classmates and educators. This takes time. Often difficulties can be worked out, and the students can benefit from the special opportunities and features which first attracted them.

However, families should continue to consider options. Sometimes a move from one school to another is warranted.

CONCLUSION

Is going through all this really worth it? More and more parents say

the answer is "definitely yes."

* Despite a lot of encouragement, Mary Grace Smyth found that her three children hated school. She thought they were much smarter than the teachers thought. But after switching them to another school, Mrs. Smyth's children became honors students. (15)

* Judy Ramirez didn't know what to do about her 15 year son, Carlos. He was getting in more and more trouble at school and in the neighborhood. She talked with her neighbors who told her about a new program for students who were not doing well. She and Carlos visited the school, enrolled. Carlos went on to graduate and got a job. Ms. Ramirez thinks he never would have made it without the alternative program.

* Sam Newgate thought that his daughter Shahara, could be getting more from school. She was an honor student at high school and popular with teachers and other students. But she seemed to be coasting. After reading an article in the local newspaper, the Newgates decided it might be a good idea for her to try enrolling in a college course. Shahara continued taking most of her courses at the high school. But 3 times a week she drove 30 miles to the University of Minnesota to take chemistry and physics. She found a new challenge and respect for her enormous talent. "I love being in a course where everyone cares as much about science as I do," says Shahara. And she is learning more about scholarships for which she may be eligible.

The list of families and students who have benefitted from choice among schools is endless. Families are learning that with the proper research, advice and guidance, they can make good decisions about schools for their children. Choice and freedom are basic in a democracy. It's about time it came to our educational system.

NOTES

1 Clinchy, Evans "It's Just Like One Big Family," Equity and Choice , Winter, 1986, pp. 77-78.

2. Ibid .

3. National Governors' Association, Time for Results: The Governors' 1991 Report on Education , (Washington, D.C.: NGA, 1986)

4. Atherton, Frederick "Dual Credit Evaluation Summary," Florida Department of Education, Tallahassee, mimeographed, 1987

5. Glenn, Charles Looking Back, Looking Ahead, in Equity Choice and Effective Urban Education (Quincy, Mass: Massachusetts Department of Education, April, 1985, p. 10)

6. Snider, William "Massachusetts District Backs Plan to Integrate Its Students on Basis of Language, Not Race," Education Week , Feb. 11, 1987, pp. 1, 15, and a telephone conversation with Mr. Alves

7. Minnesota Department of Education, Post-Secondary Enrollment Options Program, Final Report (St. Paul, Mn. Department of Education, 1987)

8. A number of people helped me develop this list, including Charles Glenn, Massachusetts Department of Education, Mary Anne Raywid, Hofstra University, Linda Darling-Hammond, Rand Corporation, and Diane Hedin, University of Minnesota. However, the final responsibility is mine.

9 See Gallup Poll, Phi Delta Kappan , September, 1987

10 Rioux, William, and the Staff of the National Committee for Citizens in Education, You can Improve Your Child's School , New York: Simon & Schuster, 1980, p. 200

11. There are hundreds of examples. Here are a few of the best:

Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Cambridge Elementary Schools

Detroit Public Schools: Alternative Schools, Magnet Middle Schools, Specialty High Schools (3 publications)

Minneapolis: A Guide to K-12 Programs in the Minneapolis Public Schools

New York City District 4: Guide to Programs in District 4

Saint Paul Public Schools: Speciality Magnet Schools Information

Seattle Public Schools: A Guide to Programs 1987-88

Washington (State): Educational Alternatives in Washington

12 The Cambridge Public Schools Parent Center has prepared a 1 page sheet to help parents select schools for their children. Cambridge suggests that parents decide which of 16 factors are very important, fairly important and not important. The factors are: size of school, proximity to home, education program, style of teaching, physical facilities, atmosphere of school, parental involvement, transportation distance, after-school day care, after school activities, other day care arrangements, near to work, cultural/racial composition, reputation and/or perception, continuing friendships developed at pre-school, and student-teacher interaction. The Cambridge Parent Information Center has published other information which can help parents decide among schools. Their address is Parent Information Center/ Harrington School, 850 Cambridge St, Cambridge, Ma 02141

13. Henderson, Anne, "The Evidence Continues to Grow," Columbia, Maryland: National Committee for Citizens in Education, 1987

14. Coleman, James, and Hoffer, Thomas, Public and Private High Schools: The Impact of Communities , New York: Basic Books, Inc. 1987

15 Names in the next several examples have been changed. But each represents a real family known to the author. Several of these families appear in greater detail in Joe Nathan, Free to Teach: Achieving Equity and Excellence in Schools , Minneapolis: Harper Row-Winston, 1984.